

Cop Watch Los Angeles

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Cop Watch is a North American activist network dedicated to monitoring and documenting police brutality and harassment in various cities. Although the first group to call itself “Copwatch” emerged in Berkeley, California in 1990, the tactic of using citizen patrols to observe the conduct of the police can be traced to the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, the Los Angeles Chapter of the SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), and the Deacons for Defense and Justice in the South. The activities of Cop Watch chapters range from photographing, videotaping, and publicizing instances of police abuse and harassment, to holding “Know Your Rights” workshops and other events to arm people with information about their own communities, as well as to develop alternatives to policing and prisons. While some chapters have non-interference policies when it comes to police and are largely focused on the *watching* part, other Cop Watch groups have taken a more militant stance.

Cop Watch LA (CWLA) is one such group that extends its activities beyond passive observation. According to its mission statement:

CWLA is a program dedicated to the struggle that will end police terrorism through collecting information on and observing police activity, by offering support to those caught in the criminal injustice system, fighting for change without a reformist consciousness, and working side-by-side with oppressed communities to create revolutionary alternatives to policing, prisons, and all systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation.

On July 11, 2005 the Los Angeles Police Department murdered 19-month-old Suzie Lopez Pena in Watts, California. At the time the Los Angeles Chapter of the Southern California Anarchist Federation (SCAF-LA) was organizing and holding meetings in South Central Los Angeles at Chuco’s Justice Center, a community center that houses the offices of the Youth Justice Coalition, Critical Resistance, and the October 22nd Coalition to Stop Police Brutality. In response to the Pena murder and the recent LAPD murders of Devin Brown, Deandre Brunston, and Gonzalo Martinez, SCAF-LA joined the Stop Terrorism and Oppression by the Police Coalition, out of which Cop Watch LA was born.

After SCAF-LA disbanded, the working-class youth-of-color members of SCAF-LA created the Revolutionary Autonomous Communities (RAC), whose aim is to define and organize around principles of autonomy, self-determination, self-organization, mutual aid, revolution, and self-defense. The alliance of RAC and CWLA created a more revolutionary type of police monitoring group because it upheld the idea that the community itself had to take up the tactics and strategy of organizing and defending itself from the occupying force – police and all law enforcement agencies of the state.

Heavily influenced by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Ejercito Zapatista por Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), the Magonista movement, the Horizontalist movement in Argentina, the *Especifista* anarchist tendency, and other revolutionary indigenous movements throughout the world, RAC and CWLA presented their guidelines, goals, and mission to the community. One of the central organizing principles of CWLA – that

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members couldn't patrol in a community they didn't live in or weren't invited to by the people who live there – led to CWLA local chapters in South Central Los Angeles and Long Beach, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, Watts, Santa Ana, and other parts of the city. They also built alliances and strong communication ties with organizations doing similar work in Los Angeles (e.g., the Los Angeles Community Action Network, the Black Riders Liberation Party, the Youth Justice Coalition, Frente Contra las Redadas), and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in New York and the Move Organization in Philadelphia.

CWLA has participated in the defense of the South Central Farm, supported the Cardenas family who filmed their relative being beaten by two Hollywood cops while choking him, observed the police at the May 1, 2007 immigrant rights march (which was brutally attacked by the police), and initiated a learning process to deal with internal conflict by

holding talking circles to heal the community while maintaining the struggle.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism in the United States, 1946–Present; Argentina, Social and Political Protest, 2001–2007; Black Panthers; Latin American Punk Rock and Protest; Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Zapatistas, EZLN, and the Chiapas Uprising

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